Hypertext Revisited

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a new approach to literary hypertext, which foregrounds the notion of *interrupting* rather than that of *linking*. It also claims that, given the dialectic relationship of literature in print and digital-born literature, it may be useful to reread contemporary hypertext in light of a specific type of literature in print that equally foregrounds aspects of segmentation and discontinuity: serialized literature (i.e. texts published in installment form). Finally, it discusses the shift from spatial form to temporal form in postmodern writing as well as the basic difference between segment and fragment.

Two Perspectives on Hypertext's "Nonsequentiality"

There exists a large consensus that the shift from analog print culture to digital writing is not an absolute paradigm shift [1]. Furthermore, although one should admit that literature, in the traditional sense of the word, will never be the same [2], a linear, teleological, technodeterminist approach to cultural history is not the best solution when it comes to understanding the mechanisms of change and transformation in writing and reading culture. It is from this perspective that we propose a critical rereading of a basic aspect of digital writing, namely hypertext: "a specific form of digital fiction in which fragments of electronic text, known as lexias, are connected by hyperlinks" [3]. This definition of hypertext as nonsequential writing and reading allows us easily to establish relationships between digital and print. For although hypertext is often presented as "print + something," i.e. as something that print cannot achieve by itself, print culture has always been open to many forms of hypertextual nonsequentiality (it may suffice to think of Queneau's *Hundred Thousand Billion Poems*, Cortazar's *Hopscotch* or Pavić's *Dictionary of the Khazars*).

Until now, however, hypertext theory has often put a strong, if not exclusive, focus on the possibilities of *linking*—more specifically on the many opportunities of choosing between various writing or reading paths. The key to this tactic is multiplicity, plurality, difference, heterogeneity. In the present analysis, and following the example of certain authors who have demonstrated a similar distrust of the hegemony of unhampered linking [4], we focus instead on an opposite tactic, which insists on the constraint of *interrupting*. Here, the key words are fragmentation—more particularly, (spatial) segmentation on the one hand and (temporal) periodization on the other. The two perspectives (linking, interrupting) cannot of course be completely separated, but their basic mechanisms and general stakes are far from the same, and, in the global framework of the discussion on print culture versus digital culture, an in-depth reflection on "interrupting" can prove helpful for a new theory and practice of hypertext, which, after a spectacular start in the late 1980s, had difficulties in keeping up with the expectations raised by the launch of Eastgate's *Storyspace* in 1987. In order to begin this reflection, we revisit one of the possible print equivalents of interrupting, namely literature published in installment form (classic examples that come to mind here are works of Charles Dickens and Alexandre Dumas, but much of 19th-century literature was periodical, as, in a different register, today comics and even graphic novel production still are). These texts may seem linear, sequential, even continuous, and in that sense they are definitely anti-hypertextual. At the same time, however, they are also spatially and temporally interrupted, and in that sense they unmistakably have something in common with hypertext. Yet what exactly? In what follows, we discuss five aspects of traditional installment writing, in order to see to what extent they may help remediate hypertext. We first present these aspects and identify the problem they hint at before giving a brief example that has recently implemented most of the "lessons" that can be learned from the installment tradition: J.R. Carpenter's *in absentia* (2008).

Five Aspects of Installment Writing and Their Possible Impact on Hypertext

Installment literature was a specific type of writing and reading fostered by new publication formats: newspapers and magazines, whose tremendous success as a popular and democratic cultural practice resulted from the combined effects of new production techniques, which helped cut costs, and the gradual spread of literacy, which helped increase the audience. Installment literature is often seen as a synonym for thrill-oriented, sensational, unsophisticated, cheap and melodramatic literature. Its most crucial attribute is extreme discontinuity. When reading the latest installment of a story, the reader has no ability to skip ahead to what comes next. She can reread previous installments, provided they have been stored in one way or another, but the target-oriented structure of all narrative ensures that such a rereading is not a satisfying alternative to reading forward in the narrative, which matters most. For that very reason, installment literature has experienced the necessity of becoming hypernarrative: Its rhythm is paced, its use of cliffhangers is systematic, its dramatic structure is overwhelming. Hypernarrativity is thus a form of structural compensation for the narrative breakdown of each section, i.e. for the impossibility of going beyond the final word of the day or the week or the month.

Hypertext has not always followed the same paths. In quite a few cases, it has lost the correct balance between discontinuity (which is a *structural given*: the text is interrupted) and continuity (which is a *power*, not to unify the text or to impose an artificial linearity on it, but to "recompense" the efforts of the reader plunged into a possibly disrupting environment). In

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other words, the difficulties readers have in paying sustained attention to hypertext narrative may hint at a key problem of this kind of writing. The unsettling aspects of discontinuity can only be effective if there is enough continuity, for if there is no continuity to challenge or criticize, discontinuity itself loses its sting and turns into hampering indifference.

A second characteristic of installment writing is the fact that the text is not a "free-floating" sign. Materially speaking, it interacts with a *co-text* (i.e. a set of texts that are contiguous to it in the same host medium) as well as with the *con-text* (the historical and cultural environment). Installment literature is typically by definition part of a larger whole and influenced by what is outside the text (as can be seen very easily in the history of comics as periodical literature) [5].

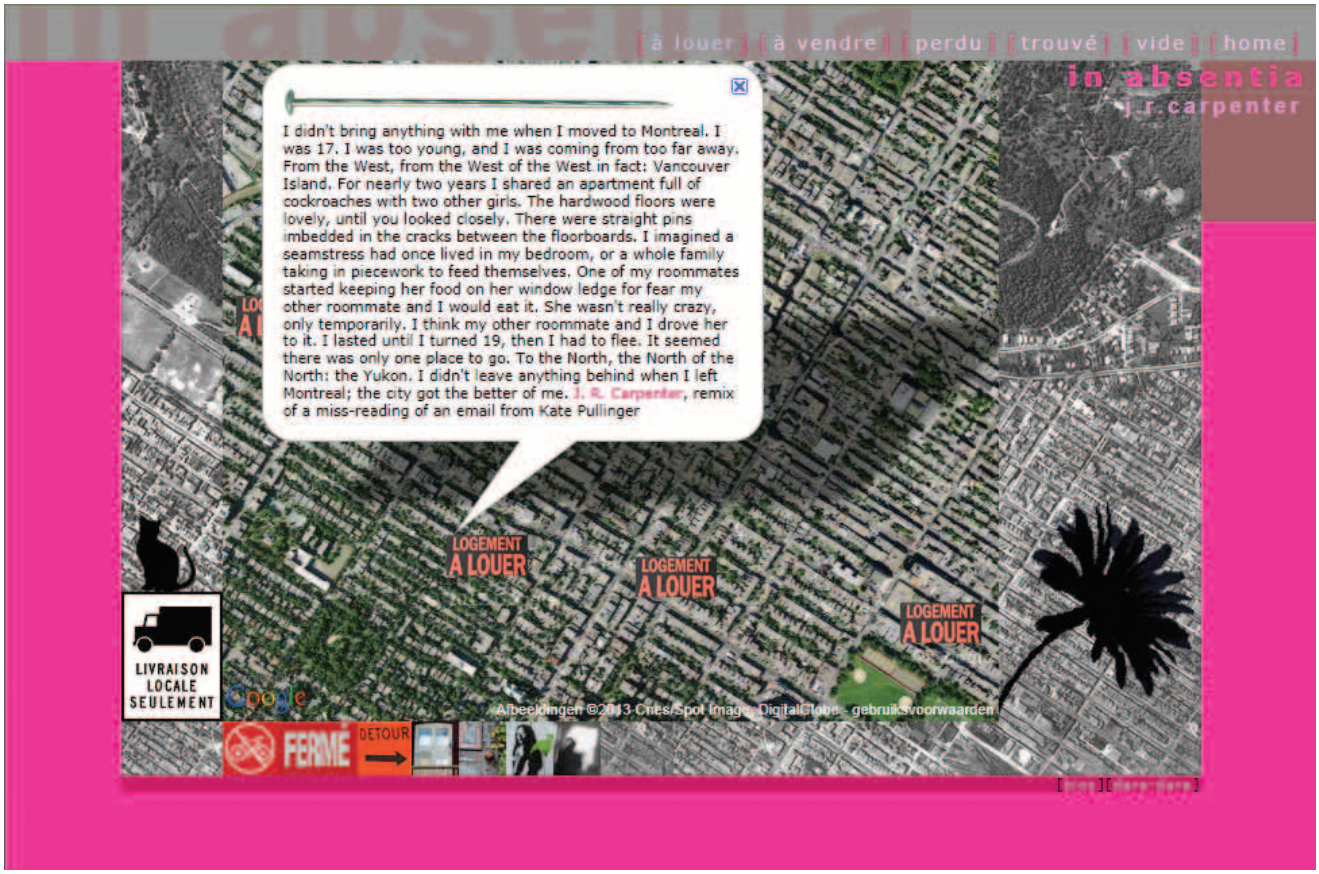
Here as well, hypertext can benefit from the study of this type of co-textual and con-textual "knitting," which is lacking in quite a few cases. It is mainly the co-textual embedding of hypertext that represents a problem. Hypertextual works are often defined by a strong political awareness and commitment, and sometimes even by a certain sense of political emergency (as our example by J.R. Carpenter will make clear), but the Internet does not seem to be the easiest environment for hypertexts that want to bridge the gap between text and co-text. The blurring of boundaries between pages and websites on the Internet makes it difficult to *circumscribe* a domain or field, hence the "missing link" between the utterly segmented text on the one hand (each lexia of which is expected to make sense in an autonomous way) and the endless ocean of pages and sites.

A third feature is the double nature of narrative, which is better exploited in installment literature than in hypertext. Narrative is not just a finished object; it is also an open experience. The Swiss narratologist Raphaël Baroni has made a clear distinction between two ways of making and reading a plot. Emplotment firstly can be seen as a "configuration conferring meaning and unity to the narrated events." Second, it can alternatively be read as "a puzzling representation whose aim is to orient the attention of the interpreter toward an anticipated but uncertain resolution" [6]. In the first case, the reader has a complete view of the story, which she tries to convert into a meaningful whole. In the second case, the reader is following the story at the moment of its unfolding and is focusing on the question: "What's next?" These two perspectives are complementary, but traditionally a strong preference is given to the form: When we analyze stories, we analyze "complete" stories, not stories still being read. Installment literature draws our attention to the unfolding of the story.

This two-sidedness of installment plots is also something that hypertext should not put between brackets. It might help to get beyond the perhaps-strong emphasis put on so-called database logic, which certain authors, often inspired by Manovich, foreground as the hypertextual alternative to the old-fashioned narrativity of print culture [7]. In such logic, the dominant structure of the text is no longer the narrative sequence but the possibility of nonlinear and nonnarrative sampling of material borrowed from existing databases (spatial arrangement becomes more important than temporal ordering). Other voices have insisted instead on the possible, if not necessary, convergence of the two models [8].

Taking into account the necessity of framing the database as part of a narrative structure, hypertext—and perhaps literature on screen in general—should not opt mechanically for a database model, whose limits have now become blatant. This of course does not mean that database works are less valuable than other ones, but it does signify that they

Fig. 1. J.R. Carpenter, *in absentia*: lexia of the "to let" section. (© J.R. Carpenter)



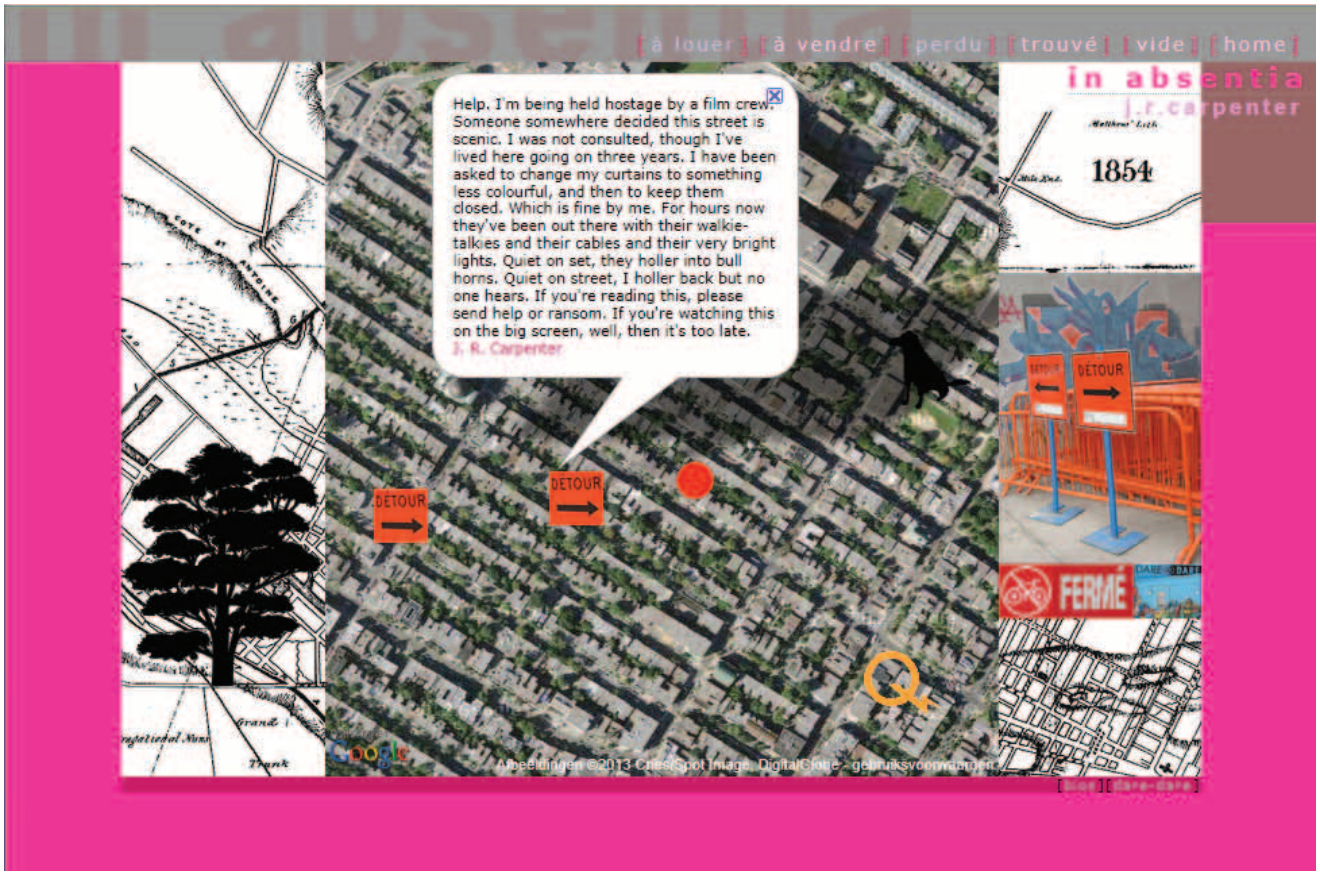


Fig. 2. J.R. Carpenter, *in absentia*: lexia of the "lost" section. (© J.R. Carpenter)

cannot be used as the universal model for new ways of writing and reading on screen.

A fourth aspect of installment literature is the unity of segment and whole. Installment literature divides story and plot, yet at the same time the all-encompassing whole is never lost, not even in types of installment literature that strongly focus on the individual segments and the progressive unfolding of the story, whose outcome is not always known at the beginning.

In certain forms of hypertext, one can have the impression that this balance between temporal development and spatial co-presence of the elements is jeopardized. In many hypertexts, there is a kind of absolute power given to the "click" or, even more narrowly, to the *string*. The distinctive feature of hypertextual literature is identified with the limitless possibilities of "clicking through" or *endless continuation*, as if this mechanism suffices to produce interesting literature. A typical example of such a hypostasis of the *ribbon*, i.e. of mere unfolding at the expense of configuration, can be seen in Scott McCloud's early but now largely forgotten speculations on digital comics [9].

A fifth and last characteristic of installment literature is the presence of real time—and the possibility of establishing a link between the fictional and the nonfictional. The time one needs to step from one installment to another, i.e. the time one has to wait for the release of a new installment, is not a fictional slice of time; it is real time. Certain forms of installment literature do manage to include this parameter in their project, as demonstrated for instance by the attempt to create a meaningful relationship between the publication date and the theme of the installment or, more generally, by the desire to stick as closely as possible to the news of the day (as we all know, good television series try to achieve similar effects).

Hypertext may have a strong interest in reorienting its legitimate fascination with interactivity in this temporal dimension. It cannot suffice to open the work to the readers' input, whatever the quality or the relevance of these contributions may be. One should pay attention as well to the temporal layer of this dialogue and try to invent new forms of periodical segmentation, inspired by the best practices of print culture or other formats but adapted to the properties of literature on screen. By emphasizing its relationships with real time, hypertext might also enhance its very newness. If one admits the "essential" link between modernity (as a historical category linked with *high modernism* and Greenbergian aesthetics) and the shift from space to time in what comes next (see the reconceptualization of *postmodern* art in terms of *speed* in Gauthier [10]), then hypertext should not overemphasize the role of the image and of its spatial architecture (as it is often tempted to do, thanks to the easy integration of visual data), but should explore more audaciously the speed and rhythm of writing. Hypertext should not take as its model *visual poetry* but rather *music*.

J.R. Carpenter's *in absentia* [11], a critical project on the gentrification of Montréal, is a good example of the ways in which new forms of hypertext manage to deal with the difficulties of the medium, proposing solutions that confirm the hypotheses defended in this article. Here is how the author describes the project:

> It used short "postcard story" narratives and the Google Maps API to address issues of gentrification and its erasures in the Mile End neighborhood of Montreal. The piece was commissioned by an artist-run-centre based in the neighborhood. There are stories in English and in French, written by multiple authors. The launch party was a neighborhood

> block party held on the Quebec national holiday—thousands of people attended—an animated version of the piece was projected on the underside of a viaduct throughout the event. Stories were added over the course of the summer and into the autumn of that year [12].

in absentia illustrates each of the aspects of installment literature that we have discussed here: (1) Increased narrativity of the lexias: Each lexia proposes a (fictional) short story in which the author gives voice to the low-income neighbors' fear of eviction (see Fig. 1 for an example of such a small story borrowed from the "to let" section of the work, which is mainly organized according to the types of relationships between the neighbors and their apartments: "to let," "for sale," "lost," "found," "empty" and, ironically, "home"). (2) Strong interaction with co-text and context: By interweaving the stories with manipulated material from Google Maps, Carpenter stresses the "reality" of her fictional treatment of urbanization and real estate issues. (3) Integration of narrative as configuration and as puzzling representation: The stories invented by the author are "open" stories, which the reader has to read not only as representations of something that has happened but as an ongoing experience whose end is yet to be discovered. (4) Limited use of "clicking through": Although the reader is of course invited to visit more than one page or section, the work is built in such a way that its (momentary) interruption does not prevent the reader from understanding the whole (see Fig. 2); the underlying map continually recalls the relationship of the individual lexia to the whole while enhancing the navigating comfort of the reader). (5) Strong presence of real time and the awareness of real-life change: Although the work sketches a memory of the neighborhood as it never really was but as it could have been, the sometimes-fantastical overtones of the work never divert the reader's attention from the central issue of actual and continuing gentrification in today's Montréal.

More generally, Carpenter's use of installment and interruption powerfully underscores the political dimension of the text: By replacing the default option of a rhizomatic hypertext with a "stop and go" structure of small units that are part of a larger story, *in absentia* manages to suggest the unfinished character of the larger story, which is therefore open to change in real life, provided the reader chooses to go back and forth, as the text allows her to do, between the fictional representation of the city's problems and the actual mutations of the city itself.

New Perspectives

We conclude our analysis by briefly sketching a new question, in order to clear the ground for further developments in a field that seems less dynamically explored than it was one or two decades ago: the difference between *segment* and *fragment*.

In Western literature, the fragment refers not simply to the process of dividing a larger whole into smaller segments but to something that testifies to what literature is or *ought to be*. In German Romanticism, the fragment is not just a kind of writing among others but is its most absolute form [13]. The fragment is characterized by two features. First, it is really a fragment, i.e. a piece of writing that *resists integration* into a larger whole and whose incompleteness is an essential feature: A fragment is a part of a whole, but that whole must by definition remain absent. Second, the fragments composing a text are not "linked" but "juxtaposed": Their logic is *paratactic*, not *syntactic*, and in that regard the fragment, which is positioned as a new genre, must reject all known genre distinctions.

Hypertext theory rightly emphasizes the role of the fragment while also stressing the decentering of the rhizomatic text. Yet in this approach, the fragmentary aspects of writing are overshadowed by the very dynamics of the text's endless and borderless expansion, so that the most essential aspect of the fragment, i.e. the resistance to completion, proves eclipsed by the Dionysian creative possibilities of the new writing spaces. New forms of hypertext should explore the aesthetics of minimalism, rejecting the default option of exuberant proliferation inscribed in the DNA of much contemporary hypertextual writing. Although technology-driven, literature is always more than just the practical implementation of what a technological device allows or invites us to do; it is a critical reflection on this device, and this goal may lead it to question what seems "natural" to a certain technology. One may have the impression that this is not the most popular path today, but perhaps it is time for a change.

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